

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PARANORMAL BELIEF: A RESEARCHER'S HANDBOOK by Harvey J. Irwin. Hertfordshire, England: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009. Pp. vii + 213. \$34.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-902806-93-8.

Psychologists and other behavioral researchers have been interested for many years in why otherwise ordinary people sometimes hold beliefs about themselves and their worlds that appear to be biased, irrational, or contrary to what most other people believe. Early efforts to explain unusual beliefs, such as Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, were mostly descriptive in nature, but more recent investigations have involved careful experimental and correlational studies of the situational and dispositional antecedents of atypical beliefs. In *The Psychology of Paranormal Belief: A Researcher's Handbook*, Irwin focuses on one subset of such beliefs—those involving phenomena that are commonly regarded as “paranormal.” In this book, Irwin provides a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of theory and research on the nature and functions of paranormal beliefs, the characteristics of people who believe them, and methodological and measurement issues in this area. Although most of the scholarship in the book is based on work in psychology, it also relies heavily on sociological and anthropological perspectives.

Irwin begins by tackling the thorny conceptual problem of how to define a paranormal belief. The range of phenomena that are typically characterized as “paranormal” is quite broad, encompassing beliefs involving superstitions, extrasensory perception, divination, magic, disembodied spirits, time travel, extraterrestrials, cryptozoological creatures (such as

Bigfoot and chupacabra), and even certain features of organized religions. Given the diversity and complexity of these beliefs, one should not be surprised that no one has yet offered a definition of paranormal belief that easily captures them all. However, the conceptualization that Irwin offers works as well, if not better, than most. Irwin defines a paranormal belief as "a proposition that has not been empirically attested to the satisfaction of the scientific establishment but is generated within the nonscientific community and extensively endorsed by people who might be expected by their society to be capable of rational thought and reality testing" (pp. 16-17). Irwin stresses that paranormal beliefs need not involve assertions that are fundamentally scientifically unacceptable but only those that are not currently verified or accepted by science. For example, nothing in science suggests that cryptozoological or extraterrestrial creatures cannot exist, but because their existence has not been scientifically documented, maintaining that they exist constitutes a paranormal belief.

Irwin's working definition is particularly intriguing because it encompasses not only the typical variety of paranormal beliefs (for example, beliefs in ghosts, psychic phenomena, and astrology) but also widely accepted claims that have not been scientifically confirmed such as the belief that God answers prayers or the belief in a just world. Irwin is correct to suggest that such beliefs should be regarded as paranormal no matter how many people believe them or how accepted they are within a particular culture.

After establishing the domain of the book, Irwin discusses sociocultural influences on both what people regard as paranormal (beliefs that are accepted as self-evident in one culture may be viewed as wildly paranormal in another) and who comes to endorse paranormal beliefs. The determinants of paranormal beliefs are largely the same as those of any belief system, including influences that originate from parents, peers, one's conjugal partner or spouse, educational institutions, social movements, the media, and culture more generally.

In chapter 3, Irwin provides an invaluable service to all researchers who study paranormal beliefs by describing and critiquing the most commonly used self-report measures of paranormal belief systems. For researchers who study paranormal beliefs, this chapter alone is worth the price of the book, providing not only detailed descriptions of the psychometric properties of the measures and reviews of studies that have used them but also the scales themselves (in an appendix). Coming away from this chapter, it is easy to see the advantages and disadvantages of each measure as well as a broad picture of the current state of the field and how the measurement of paranormal beliefs might be improved in the future. No researcher should undertake a study of paranormal beliefs without consulting this chapter.

Having dispensed with conceptual and measurement issues, Irwin devotes four chapters to detailed scholarly analyses of four prevailing hypotheses regarding the antecedents of paranormal beliefs, hypotheses

that focus on social marginality, people's worldviews, cognitive deficits, and psychodynamic functions. The social marginality hypothesis proposes that people who are most inclined to adopt paranormal beliefs tend to be members of disadvantaged or marginalized groups, who gravitate to such beliefs to deal with the sense of low control and privation that they regularly experience. After reviewing the empirical evidence, Irwin concludes that research findings do not support the social marginality hypothesis. The worldview hypothesis, which links paranormal beliefs to a broader worldview involving subjective and esoteric beliefs, fares somewhat better, although Irwin notes that other considerations, such as a sense of being vulnerable to uncontrollable events, may also be involved.

A third perspective, the cognitive deficits hypothesis, suggests that people who adopt paranormal beliefs tend to be illogical, irrational, uncritical, or credulous, if not downright unintelligent. By and large, the data do not support the notion that people believe in paranormal events because they are unable to think carefully and critically about such things. Finally, the psychodynamic functions hypothesis suggests that people adopt paranormal beliefs when those beliefs serve psychological functions for them. Although the hypothesis has little support with respect to adopting paranormal beliefs in general, Irwin suggests that it might apply to certain kinds of paranormal beliefs. Given that many of people's beliefs serve psychological functions for them—warding off anxiety, providing meaning, reducing uncertainty, and so on—it would be surprising if paranormal beliefs did not serve these functions as well.

Irwin's comprehensive review of research with respect to the antecedents of paranormal beliefs organizes the literature in a coherent and thematic way that addresses key questions about the origin of paranormal beliefs. Like all good reviews, it raises at least as many questions as it answers, allowing readers to see lingering questions that, if addressed, would promote our understanding of paranormal belief systems. Furthermore, Irwin provides the interested researcher with the most comprehensive bibliography imaginable with over 800 references.

The book concludes with the author's own efforts to integrate what is known about paranormal beliefs within a causal model. A central feature of this model is the distinction between the presence and the activation of a belief. That is, people may come to hold a particular belief, but that belief may have little effect on their interpretations of or reactions to events until it is activated. According to the model, early experiences with a sense of low control and the resulting desire for mastery are hypothesized to underlie the presence of paranormal beliefs, which are molded by a combination of sociocultural and psychological factors such as those that are discussed in chapter 2. Then, contextual stress arising from a situation that induces an immediate sense of vulnerability or loss of personal control is needed to activate the belief and bring it to the foreground. An activated belief may involve both conscious thoughts and

observable behaviors that are relevant to the belief (such as consulting a psychic, reading about paranormal phenomena, or joining a ghost-hunting group). Such thoughts and actions are then predicted to lower state anxiety.

Irwin's model takes an important step in trying to explain the origin and functions of paranormal beliefs. As he admits, the model may not apply equally to all categories of paranormal beliefs, possibly being most relevant to parapsychological and magical beliefs. (It is more difficult to see this process underlying beliefs regarding cryptozoological creatures, for example.) Indeed, one recurring question in the book is the degree to which various categories of paranormal beliefs operate similarly.

The model also does not easily address instances in which people believe in paranormal phenomena that they would prefer *not* to believe in. There are certainly people who believe in the existence of ghosts, psi, and extraterrestrials who would be happier and less anxious if they didn't, but the model does not appear to account for paranormal beliefs that increase rather than reduce anxiety or a sense of vulnerability. Nor does it easily explain people who come to a paranormal belief via a purely intellectual route when they are convinced by what they view as persuasive evidence. Although the model might not account for all types of paranormal beliefs, it certainly provides an organizing framework for much research in the area, identifies novel relationships among variables, and generates clear, testable predictions regarding the antecedents of such beliefs.

Compared to many other scholars who have focused on unconventional, irrational, or unusual beliefs, Irwin's perspective is both more sympathetic and more even-handed. His approach is sympathetic in that he does not automatically assume that people who believe in things that science does not accept are necessarily deluded, irrational, or psychopathological. It is even-handed in including within his purview paranormal beliefs that are widely accepted, including religious beliefs involving prayer, resurrection, and the existence of angels.

Overall, *The Psychology of Paranormal Belief* makes an important contribution to our understanding of paranormal beliefs and offers insights and direction for the next generation of research on this topic. It should be of interest not only to readers who are interested in paranormal beliefs per se but also to those who are interested in the broader question of how and why people come to adopt the beliefs that they hold.

MARK LEARY

*Department of Psychology*  
*Duke University*  
*Durham, NC, 27708, USA*  
*leary@duke.edu*